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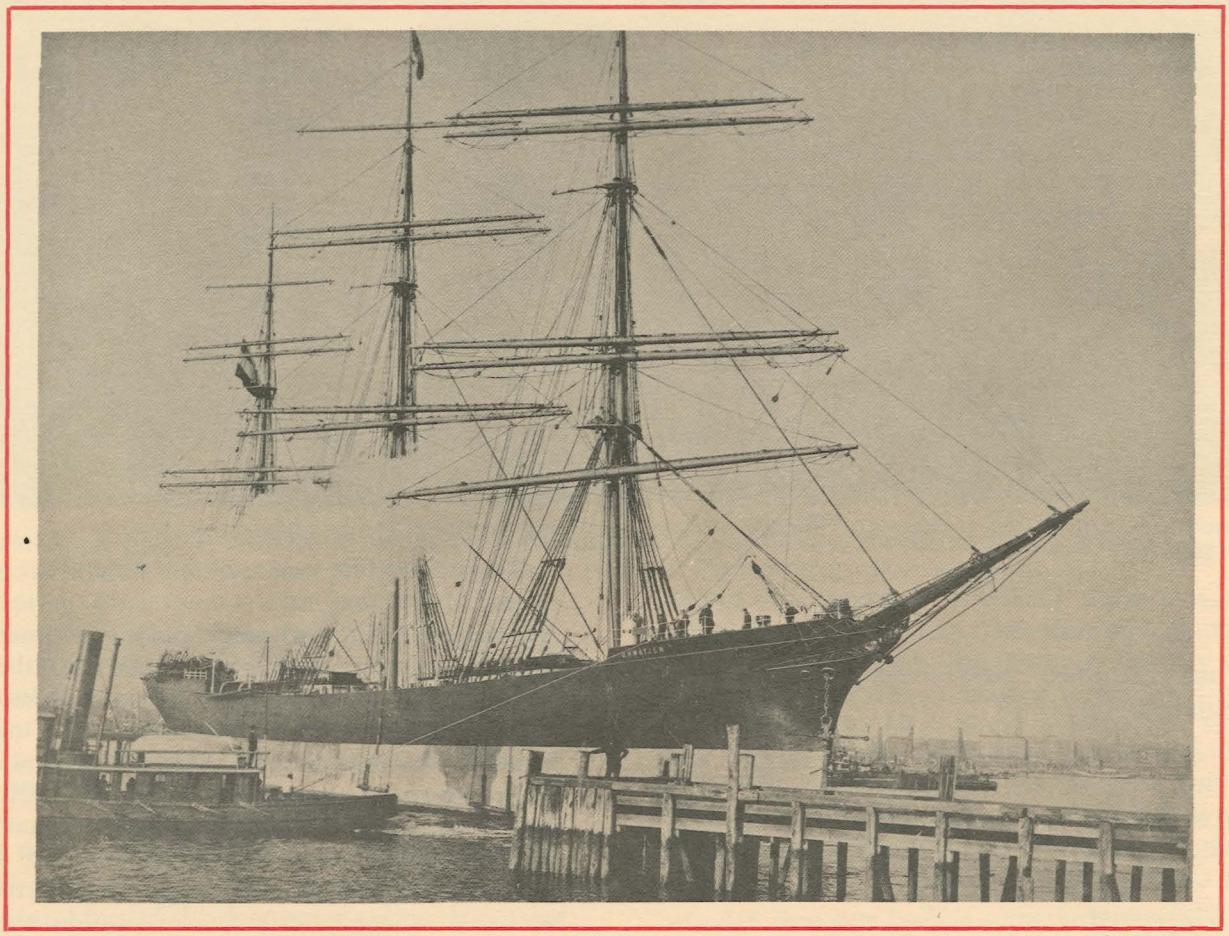


— Photograph from Dr. Jurgen Meyer, Hamburg

"Although a modern ship in most ways, built in 1892, the *Watjen* was behind the times in having no steam donkey engine to handle cargo and in steering with tiller ropes instead of a patent worm-screw . . ." The cloud of steam in this photograph is issuing from the tug hauling the *D. H. Watjen* alongside the wharf, probably in Brooklyn.

Christmas Afloat: My First and My Last

by Capt. Fred Klebingat

On Christmas morning with a rising southeast gale, the so-called "steam schooner" *Coos Bay* — actually a war surplus L S T efficiently adapted for the lumber trade with Southern California — is hurrying ahead; the exhausts of her twin diesels roar, she leaves a wide wake astern in the rising seas and gloom. At breakfast time the ship is only thirty miles away from her destination; she is trying to salve as much of the holiday as possible. To be sure, there will not be any longshoremen waiting on the dock, for this is one of the few days in the year on which they refuse to toil.

Rainfall and seas increase as she progresses. At last here is Coos Bay bar, which she must cross, but it is not very rough with the wind from this quarter. Going in with a flood tide, the vessel does not take

long to reach the Bayshore dock and its stacks of packaged lumber. The *Coos Bay* turns around, one engine ahead, one astern, and ties up portside to the wharf. The gangway is lowered and as most of the crew have their homes in California, they hurry ashore to greet their loved ones from the dock phone booth. The time I am writing about is the late 1960s.

It now begins to rain in torrents. This is quite usual for this part of Oregon, even if it is not blowing a gale outside at sea. For myself, chief mate and sometimes relieving master, I decide to linger on board and see what Guy Dalton, the steward and cook, will put on the table. Guy is a man nearing sixty, a crucial member of the ship's company, tall and slender. The best kind of shipmate, a man of few words and master of his craft.

The messmen set the table. Baked ham and turkey with dressing and mashed potatoes arrive. Followed by cake and pies and nuts and raisins. There is wine on the table – unusual – and on a separate sideboard all the workings of a cocktail for those who could not call the day Christmas without one.

Clarence Krueger, the man in charge of the wharf, had taken our lines when we neared the dock. Clarence now enters the messroom, "Merry Christmas!" says he.

"Have a drink, Clarence," someone calls to him. "You look cold and wet."

"I may at that," says Clarence, shedding his lumberjack's "tin coat."

Ken Lewis, the paymaster from the lumber company that owns the *Coos Bay*, enters the mess room; "Here is the money you requested," he says to the captain. "You will want some dough for the crew – a Merry Christmas to everybody."

Ken is greeted.

Clank, clank, clank – the sound of steel-shod shoes on the steel deck outside.

"That must be Crumpacker."

"Merry Christmas," says Crumpacker, coming through the door. "I was just passing and saw you were in." Crumpacker,the sales manager of the organization, must have been a saving man; the little steel plates nailed to the heels of his shoes are there to save the leather heels from wearing down. We can always tell that he has arrived by that clank, clank, clank of his heels.

A jolly mood prevails. The fine food and drink contribute. And it helps that we have managed to make port and save some part of Christmas day after all.

With a satisfied feeling, a cup of coffee at hand, I sample the apple pie. Clarence Krueger, the first of the *Coos Bay*'s Christmas guests, sits down near me, nursing a brandy.

"You must have passed many a Christmas afloat," says he conversationally. "Some must have been cheerful and some must have been not so good." (I am the patriarch aboard, eighty years old and still going to sea.)

I could see that Clarence was ready for a yarn.

"That is true," I reply. ". . . I was just thinking of my first Christmas afloat. As this is likely to be the last Christmas I ever will celebrate on shipboard, I might just as well tell you about it."

This is what I told him.

* * * * *

In May of 1905 I shipped as deckboy on board of the German full-rigged ship *D. H. Watjen* at Port Talbot, Wales. I had wanted to go to sea ever since I could remember, inspired, I suppose, by the rich variety of shipping in the harbor of Kiel, the town where I grew up. There were old down-Easters in the ice trade with Norway (for some reason called "ice klippers"), an iron Indiaman delivering teak from Burma, topsail schooners from Portmadoc bringing slate for roofs, Baltic fore-and-afters, and sometimes an old brig, fetching granite curbstones; Kiel has no native stone. It was a booming city.

The waterfront hummed and I hung around the docks. My mother did not want me to go to sea – it was mostly a hard and dangerous life in those days – but she died when I was thirteen, and my father, who had a good job in the post office, acceded to my wishes a couple of years later. He wrote to a great number of companies, but they all wanted *money from him* to take me as deckboy, 350 to 500 marks. The German deckboy system of making a start under the eye of the ship's afterguard was not all that different from the British apprentice system (apprentice officers). With few exceptions the deckboys, the ordinary seamen, and the younger German A.B.s were there because German law required that they serve twelve months in a square-rigger – a schooner wouldn't do – as able seamen before being eligible to pass the examination for ship's officer. That is what I wanted to do. You had to be deckboy first, then you advanced to ordinary, and finally you became one of that exalted class in the fo'c's'le of a German ship, the able seamen (or A.B.s). To be an able seaman for one year meant maybe three years working up to it. If you didn't have in mind becoming an officer, there was no point in going to sea as deckboy in German sailing ships. It was an easier life in steam.

Somebody told my father about D. H. Watjen Co. of Bremen which had a policy of taking in young men *born on the waterfront* at no charge; in fact, they paid the deckboy ten marks a month rather than the five marks which other companies paid. Watjen at one time was the largest sailing ship firm in

This photograph, from the collection of Dr. Jurgen Meyer (Director of the Altonaer Museum in Hamburg), shows the crew of the ship *D. H. Watjen,* though not on the voyage that is here described. Three deckboys sit cross-legged in front.

Germany; they owned forty sailing ships in the early '80s; by 1905 they still operated sixteen ships and barks. When I went to their offices in Bremen, even as a boy I was impressed with the antiquity of the place. An old, old brick building shaded by trees; I noticed how thick the walls were as I entered.

The firm accepted me and I was told to join the *D. H. Watjen* in Wales, a steel square-rigger of 2185 gross tons. Most of the deepwater sailing ships were built of steel in those days, except that some of the older ones were iron. I paid my own fare across the North Sea from Germany in the steamship *Argo.* We tied up in St. Katherine's Dock, London, and I made my way across that famous city to Paddington Station and took the Great Western Railway for Wales. Port Talbot was an unimpressive place, coal dust all over, not much vegetation, bare shale hills behind and a tidal harbor where vessels entered and left through dock gates only at high tide.

But Port Talbot was not what interested me, it was the ships – the sailing ships. The docks were full of them taking on cargoes of Welsh coal for the various industries and depots of the world (Welsh coal was considered the finest by steamship engineers). Some of the coal had been pressed into a form of patent fuel called "briquets."

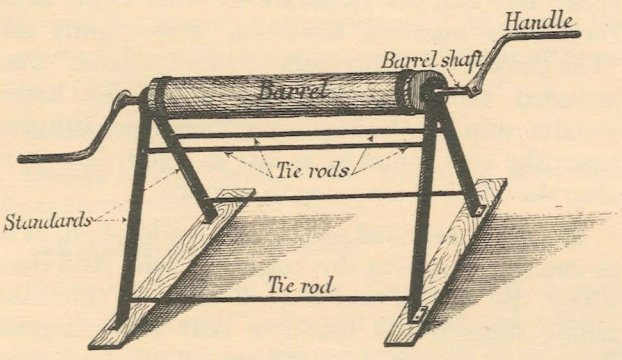
There was an energy shortage in the world in those days, too, but it was regional. San Francisco, for example, had no native energy source of any consequence – its coal came around Cape Horn from Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Wales in a steady stream of sailing ships; others crossed to the Golden Gate from Newcastle, New South Wales. New England was supplied from the mines inland from Chesapeake Bay and the Delaware by what Capt. Lewis Parker, the maritime historian, quite rightly calls "The Great Coal Schooners of New England." They included the six-master *Wyoming*, the largest wooden ship ever built at something over 3700 gross tons. She was launched as late as 1909, four years after the voyage I am going to describe.

The most deprived part of the world of all, as far as energy went, was the coast of Chile. And that's where the *Watjen* and a good many of the other sailing ships that I found in Port Talbot's grimy docks were bound. Alan Villiers says that at any one time in 1905, the year of which I am speaking, it was reckoned that at least four hundred square-rigged ships (of the five thousand such ships of all nationalities in world trade) were making Cape Horn voyages.

But we saw few of those vessels; that speaks for the size of the ocean. We loaded a full cargo of briquets and carried it to Pisagua and Iquiqui, anchorages on the northern coast of Chile, off the Atacama Desert. (The desert provided the nitrate that was our homeward bound cargo. Nitrate was brought to Europe in great quantities for use in munitions and as fertilizer.) We battled for five

weeks off Cape Horn with gales and ice and snow and mountainous seas. Our decks grew a green slime. And when we arrived . . . all this to bring a cargo of briquets to this God-forsaken shore? We got rid of the briquets, took in some nitrate at Iquiqui, and towed to a place called Caleta Buena to take in the bulk of our homeward-bound cargo. There were about four or five sailing ships anchored with us here in a cove, some discharging coal and some loading nitrate.

Everything was done by hand on the *D. H. Watjen* – she was what sailors called a "hand puller." That meant there was no steam donkey engine, which some sailing ships had. At Pisagua and Iquiqui we passed every single briquet from hand to hand into the lighters that carried them ashore. There must have been over 3500 tons of them and every briquet weighed about twenty-five pounds. The things are made of coal dust, using coal tar as a binder. The dust covers your face; sweat and the coal dust together irritate your face and the tropical heat adds to this and the skin peels off. If you rub your eyes, they will close up. There were always a few of the crew laid up, and some of them needed medical care at the so-called hospital ashore (I doubt it deserved that name). I took good care that I never rubbed my eyes and so I was the only one in the crew who worked every hour in the cargo. I was fifteen when I joined the *D. H. Watjen,* going on sixteen. As I was a husky kid, the tallest person on board at a little less than six feet, I was the only deckboy singled out for cargo work. Well, thank the Lord, we finally got to the end



of the messy briquets. They were out of the ship; we were now at our loading port and taking aboard nitrate. At least, working the hand winch was clean.

Let me tell you about this contraption, commonly called a dolly winch for some reason.

In the fore 'tween deck, out of sight, we stored three of these devices. Though out of sight, they were always available. No paint was wasted on them; they were for utility only and they were so constructed. Two iron standards, each like a "V" upside down and about four feet high, were mounted on wooden planks, we will say 3-by-8s, which again were braced together. At their apex these V-irons supported a drum about eight inches in diameter, which on each side had an iron handle long enough to give two men a chance to act as motive power. A short piece of about three-inch circumference rope acted as a brake.

This contraption was not bolted down or mounted. No, about eight or ten bags of nitrate moored the machine to the deck. To keep the wooden drum in motion five men were needed, four men to supply the necessary horsepower, while one was in reserve to spell the others about every 40 bags.

A platform sloping towards the hatch was built from rail to hatch. The second mate works as hatch tender on this platform. The rope fall from the hand winch is rove through a block up on the lower yardarm and it is fitted with a peculiar hook, quite light, sharply pointed, and shaped to a right angle. This is so it can be withdrawn even with weight on it. Another such hook is fitted to the end of the burton* that is rove through a block on the span over the hatch. The burton man is usually a Chilean; he checks the lowering of the sack from the end of a brass-covered wood spar that is secured to the forepart of the hatch coaming.

The stops used on the sacks, "chokers" you call them, are made of gasket stuff; they are also of a particular shape. They are rove around the middle of the sack. It must be the middle, otherwise the sack would drop out of the strop; in other words it would not "choke."

The man in the lighter (the *lanchero* he is called) has passed the strop around the sack; the second mate has shot down the end of the winch fall to the *lanchero*; a man on the winch has stopped the fast rotating winch drum with the rope brake as the hook reaches the *lanchero's* hand. The *lanchero* hooks the fall in the choker. "Up!" the second mate orders. The four men at the winch now carry on like madmen cranking those winch handles around as fast as they can. The sack rises up to the breast height of the hatch tender . . . he holds the hook of the burton in his left hand. He grabs the nitrate sack with his right hand, with his left he hooks on the burton. The burton man sets his rope tight.

"Let go!" the second mate orders. The four men at the winch let go the handles, the winch drum starts to spin and the second mate with a deft

*The burton is a second cargo fall rove through a block aloft. After the regular cargo fall, led to the drum of the winch, has lifted the sack of nitrate above the level of the ship's rail, the sack's weight is transferred to the burton by setting the burton taut and slacking the cargo fall. The burton block is located on what is called the cargo span, rigged over the hatch, so the sack swings over and aligns itself with the hatch, ready for lowering into the hold.

— Photograph from Captain P. A. Grueland, Denmark

The dolly winch in action aboard the steel bark *Invercauld,* built in Scotland the year before the *Watjen* was launched in Germany. Notice the sacks that "moored this contraption" to the deck. Here six men man the cranks to hoist up a basket of coal. The hatch tender stands on a platform running from rail to hatch, as described on the *D. H. Watjen.*

extraction of the hook shoots the end of the winch fall down to the waiting *lanchero*. The *lanchero* hooks the strop and "Up!" goes the next one. The sacks weight a hundred kilos – over two hundred pounds by our way of measuring.

A nitrate cargo is heavy and so you have to distribute the weight in the hold. The nitrate is stowed tier by tier – each tier a little narrower than the one below so that, after the lower hold is full, the tiers slope up from either side like the roof of a house. Only in a few places is the nitrate cargo extended to reach the side of the ship; this is to brace it. The same formation was used in the 'tween deck on a smaller scale.

* * * * *

"But hold on there – my coffee is getting cold. It is a long story!" I rose from my chair. "Let me get another cup of coffee and a little more of that fine apple pie."

"You are telling me about the good old days," Clarence ventured.

"You said it," I replied. "Ten hours of cranking in nitrate under a broiling sun. I wonder at times how much horsepower we actually put forth to hoist up those sacks at the crazy speed we always used. And I have forgotten how many sacks it took to make a cargo."

* * * * *

But let me tell you a little about how we got to this place. After all, 1905 is the year that Basil Lubbock cites in *The Last of the Windjammers* as the first of a "disastrous" cycle of three off the Horn with a number of ships and men being lost. Alan Villiers based his most recent book *The War With Cape Horn* on the same fateful 1905 – he says that fifty square-riggers were damaged or forced back that year. Wm. H. S. Jones' *The Cape Horn Breed* gives a harrowing description of what happened to the full-rigged ship *British Isles* when Capt. Barker got her into far south latitudes. We were in Pisagua when she arrived with crew members losing feet and hands to frostbite – terrible. A number of her men lost their lives.

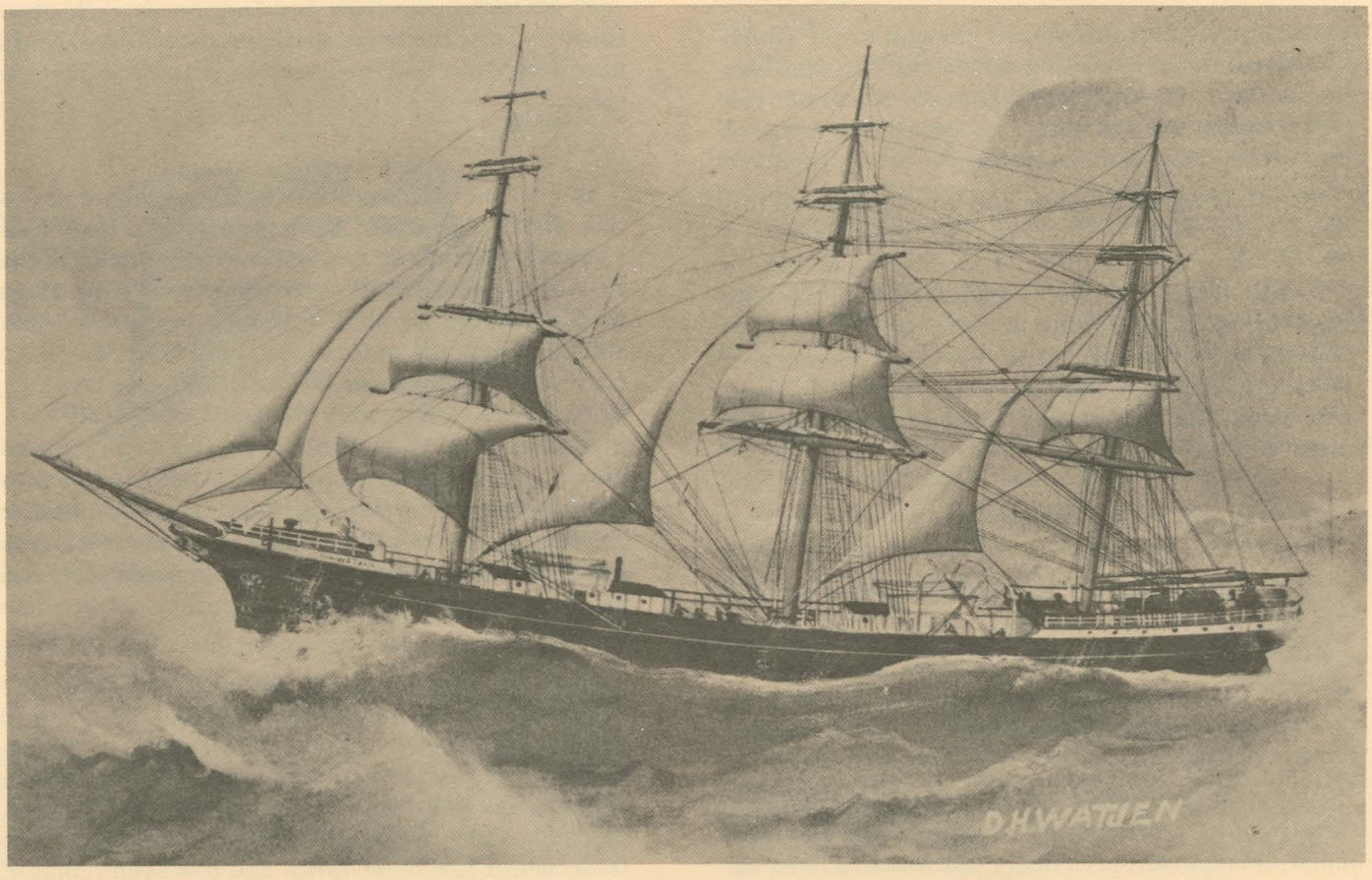
None of this happened in the *D. H. Watjen*, a well-run ship, well-handled, although in a severe winter like 1905 we could not expect to escape hardship. We had been preparing for Cape Stiff since reaching the latitude of the River Plate. All the old, patched and quilted sails that we had used in the trade winds had come down and had been replaced

with the best suit, mostly brand new. A well-found ship like ours had three suits of sails, and probably four sets of lower topsails. In the trades all the footropes and blocks were overhauled and new running rigging rove off where thought necessary. South of the Plate the spare spars were secured with extra lashings and each of the three hatches had an extra layer of three-by-twelve planks lashed on top to prevent their being stove in. Each hatch wedge was seated on a small square of canvas that was then folded around it and the cleat that held it and stitched together with palm and needle. This was to make sure that a sea didn't wash the wedges out and so free the hatch battens. A wire manrope was stretched taut from forward to aft so a man would have a continous grip as he worked his way along the main deck in heavy seas. As we actually closed with the Horn two men were sent to the wheel and two other men manned relieving tackles hooked into the tiller on each side.

Although a modern ship in most ways, built in 1892, the *Watjen* was behind the times in having no steam donkey engine to handle cargo and in steering with tiller ropes instead of a patent worm-screw attached to the rudder head. (I understand she later got a portable donkey that was rolled from hatch to hatch.) The tiller ropes were protected with a teakwood cover practically the whole width of the ship. It was all very ancient and one of the disadvantages was that when a sea struck the rudder the shock or "kick" was transmitted directly up to the helmsman through the tiller ropes. The relieving tackles were rigged as "preventers," as a sailor calls them. A man squatted on either side, protected somewhat by the canvas dodger around the taffrail, and watched the helmsman, taking up or slacking on his tackle as necessary. This saved the man at the weather helm from being suddenly flung over the top and down on the other side, landing on his head, when a sea struck the rudder blade and the wheel began a sudden spin.

In the *Watjen* we deckboys were not quartered in the fo'c's'le with the ordinary seamen and the able seamen. The four of us had a house to ourselves, just like the apprentices had in a limejuicer, right abaft the mainmast and in sight of the poop. The British would call this structure the "halfdeck." A fine enough habitation in fine weather, but the worst place in the ship when the weather turned bad. Most of the seas boarding the ship when hove to or headreaching came over the rail right here. There was scarcely a moment under these conditions when this portion of the deck was sufficiently free of water that we could even get into or leave our habitation. Doors in those days were not watertight, nicely fitted with rubber gaskets and dogs to hold them shut. We now found we had to spend time on watch

"We battled for five weeks off Cape Horn with gales and ice and snow and mountainous seas . . ."



below bailing out the place and looking for a chance to open the upper half of the door to empty the bucket outside. The seams on the lower half of the door we had caulked with oakum to stop at least some of Drake's Strait from getting into our quarters.

Not that alone, but we had to carry our food along to our home from the galley in the forward house. Very often it was lost before we could get inside the door. The ship had no fore-and-aft bridge, or "catwalk." We lived in a bad and dangerous place.

The sailors in the fo'c's'le saw our plight. The *Watjen* had a good crew that voyage, for all that there were a couple of troublemakers amongst them, real sea lawyers. But sailors are warm-hearted and they took us into their quarters where we occupied the bunks of the A.B.s who were on watch. That was a great improvement although the fo'c's'le was not a palace either; some water was always sloshing around on deck. There was no stove and the steel partitions and beams overhead were always sweating, making even the bunks damp. But at that, it was heaven in comparison to the little house on deck that we had abandoned. The galley door was only about ten feet aft of the fo'c's'le, and there was a chance to get the food into the fo'c's'le while it was still hot and not doused with salt water.

During the voyage, the ship had developed a list, due to the cargo of briquets wearing somewhat when rolling about. So when we were on the port tack, the cargo would slide to starboard and do the opposite thing when going about. There was about a foot of space between the cargo and the side of the ship in the 'tween deck.

On the occasion I am going to tell about, the *Watjen* was on the port tack. We had just had coffee in the morning, and I was going to wash the mugs, a task strictly for a boy in a German sailing ship. I looked out of the upper door of the fo'c's'le; the ship was momentarily quiet and there was about 18 inches or two feet of water in the lee scuppers. So I slid the bolt on the inside of the lower half of the door, closed it behind me (reaching inside to slide the bolt back into its socket), and rushed across the deck to fill a wooden bucket. At this very moment the ship gave a tremendous heave to leeward – she already had a list. I looked up and saw a solid wall of water at least ten feet high looming above me.

Feeling her motion, the sailors inside had quickly closed the upper half of the door to keep the fo'c's'le from being washed out. They could rescue me later – at least, I suppose that was their reasoning. I was locked out – I could not get back in without scooting across the deck and fumbling with the latch, which had a ring or nob on the outside, I just forget which. There wasn't time.

When the ship had entered these high latitudes, emergency arrangements were made for the braces so that the men could get at them to haul when heavy seas were sweeping the decks. The braces for the crojik were led from the main top to the rail in front of the poop. The fore braces were led to a spar on either side, lashed from the ship's rail to the fore fiferail, just abaft the fo'c's'lehead. These braces were at hand and I grabbed them as that great wave finally fell.

I was under water forever. I came near to drowning right on the fore deck, or so it seemed to me. I hung onto the braces like grim death, and the icy Cape Horn salt water whirled me around, whirled me around . . . It took quite a long time for the ship to free herself of that tremendous load of water. Meanwhile the sailors could not get near me.

Of course I survived, or I wouldn't be sitting here. They finally reached me, gagging on the salt water I'd swallowed, chilled, frightened. That was my souvenir of the famous Cape Horn and I've never forgotten it.

We had an excellent cook in the *Watjen*, about as good a man as you could ever hope to find in the galley of a European sailing ship. He was washed out repeatedly. The galley on the *Watjen*, like most sailing ship galleys, was a narrow passageway that ran from side to side of the deckhouse. That way there was always a lee door to use in heavy weather. The doors in all the deckhouses were in two halves, an upper and lower. When he felt it was safe to do so in heavy weather, the cook would open the upper part of the lee door to get some air into the place. But now and then a larger sea than usual boarded the ship from alee, poured in the open door and drowned the galley fire. Quite a few times I saw the galley fill up to nearly the top of the range.

But our cook was resourceful. So his galley is flooded. He gets busy with a bucket. . .

One time I was on my way along the poop, a sea boarded the ship, the galley door must have been open, a white plume of steam came out of the galley stack.

"There goes our hot dinner," said the captain.

But no, the cook got busy right away with his bucket; somewhere up under the deckhead he had some kindling in a dry place, a shot of kerosene, and up blazed the fire. The captain (and the rest of us) had a proper dinner. Our remarkable cook never failed to produce a hot meal in all those five weeks we were off Cape Horn.

Under these conditions the tiles that formed the galley floor were too slick to stand on, and so a plank was brought in that ran from side to side and which had cleats on it. His pots were all deep and they were lashed to the racks on the top of the range with spun

yarn so that they would stay in place. He had to have deep pots or his food would spill over whenever the ship took a heavy heel to leeward.

Another thing – this particular cook would dry the men's clothing, as much as he could, and one of the deckboys (not me) was detailed to keep the galley fire going at night. Now this was unusual. Sailing ship cooks did not encourage use of the galley by the crew. Ordinarily it was locked after the day was done.* I am sure that on the *Watjen* it was arranged between Captain Gerdes and the cook that the galley fire was kept going in order to dry the men's clothes. Gerdes was a captain who was considerate of his crew.

The cook helped himself to provisions as he needed them. Now, in German ships it was customary that the second mate was in charge of provisions. We called him the *Speckschneider* or "bacon cutter." But on the *D. H. Watjen* the second mate held the cook in respect:

"That man could sweep out the storeroom and make a pudding."

The cook knew how to make use of the provisions to best advantage. If the ship ran fast, dish out a little more. If the ship ran slow, cut down a little. Nothing was left when we got to port.

So on the *Watjen* the second mate whacked out only the margarine. (On the articles it was provided that we got "butter or best margarine.") The boys went aft to get their whack once a week, and the ordinary seamen went and got it for the sailors. You go to the storeroom at so-and-so time on so-and-so day. The second mate weighs it out. Into any old tin. Four boys . . . alright, get a can that holds four pounds. Then get four smaller tins and divide it up later. It was kept in your bunk or in your sea chest.

The cook hailed from Bremerhaven. He was a man in his forties; he had been cook at one time I remember he told us in a cable-laying ship. My watchmate – Willie – also hailed from Bremerhaven so we were in favor. If the two of us were on watch, the cook might say about eight o'clock in the evening, "Reach inside the lee door." There we would find a couple of rolls spread with cabin butter or an extra piece of meat. After that he would lock up the galley; he locked it at night during the good-weather part of the voyage.

Sea stories depict Fo'c's'le Jack lolling about in the Trades and smoking his pipe. But it could be altogether different; life can be very monotonous on a long trip and if there is a trouble-maker aboard, things may come to a head. If one wants to find fault, why not take it out on the cook? No matter how good he is . . .

*On a west coast schooner, the cook's cabin was an extension of the galley; the galley did not run through, side to side.

It happened one day on the *D. H. Watjen*; the gang was going to beat up the cook. It happened that he was making yeast that day and was bottling it. The men at the galley door spelled trouble. Quick as a flash, the cook knocked off the bottom of one of the bottles and with the neck of the bottle in his hand and the jagged edges pointing at his tormentors, he made for them.

"Move, you bastards!"

And they moved. And never at any time after that did they come near the cook or speak disrespectfully of him.

I must now tell you a little more about the Chilean port that we labored toward in the fashion described to finally take in our homeward-bound cargo. Caleta Buena. The steep sides of the *cordillera*, nearly vertical, rise from the water's edge. There is only a narrow foreshore that holds the warehouses, the shacks of the laborers, and a cantina or two. It is a dry, hot, and dessicated scene. There is not a blade of grass or even a cactus growing. No rain falls for years. I have been told that when that strange thing happens – when it does rain – the mountain covers itself with flowers. But they wilt in no time at all.

The nitrate is lowered from the level of the Atacama desert to the foreshore by an incline, a full car going down hauls an empty or partly loaded car to the top.

To give you an idea of how desolate we found the coast of Chile, I will point out that myself and the other boys were only ashore about three hours and we were glad to get back on board. Imagine that – boys! Always ready for an adventure. Our shore visit was at Iquiqui, the largest town on this stretch of coast. We bought some chocolate and tinned milk. The place wilted us in the same way it wilted the flowers.

There was not even a proper landing at Caleta Buena. Just to get from a small boat to shore was hazardous. There was a thick rope hanging from a beam above the boat landing. The boat rises on the swell . . . you grab the rope and swing yourself to the pier. I recall Captain Gerdes one day was leaving shore. He grabbed the rope, but let go at the wrong moment – the boat was falling on a diminishing swell. Our captain dropped about six feet and one of his feet went through the fancy teak grating in the stern sheet of the boat. The old carpenter had a lot to say about clumsy skippers who break gratings maybe just to aggravate busy ship's carpenters.

The carpenter in the *D. H. Watjen* was 72 years old. He never washed himself. When one shirt wore out he put another on – moving the old one to the outside to take the wear and tear. Nobody bothered him very much, except that once in awhile the captain interrupted his leisurely carpentry duties and sent him aloft to help the rest of the crew take in sail.

The carpenter wasn't keen about this. He forged himself a snap hook out of steel and made it fast to himself with several turns of ratline stuff around the waist. When he got out on the yard he snapped himself fast onto the jackstay. It was an early version of the safety belt now worn by industrial workers.

We were still loading the ship come Christmas Day. The cook did his best to celebrate the holiday. Recently my sister in Germany found a letter dated December 27, 1905, that I wrote to my father:

> . . . there certainly was enough to eat with us. Christmas Eve we had some punch (rum punch, courtesy of Captain Gerdes) and the cook baked a *Kloben.* He used citron, milk, sugar and some cabin butter. Each of us boys got one slice and it tasted better than Baker Lindemann's with his currants and raisins. It was a large slice and had plenty of figs and walnuts.
>
> At Iquiqui I bought a can of cocoa and two tins of condensed milk and some sugar. I have some left. The first Christmas Day we also received a tea kettle full of wine. The first Christmas Day quite a few of the crew were drunk. We, the boys, also received a mug of grog.
>
> In the afternoon the men came aft to wish the captain a Merry Christmas.
>
> "We wish you a Merry Christmas. But it is rather dry."
>
> So the captain laughed, and gave them two bottles of rum.

The cook made a stew out of prunes and served preserved potatoes, and he roasted canned beef for Christmas dinner. (This was an offering that we always called "rope yarns".) With the mug of grog inside us and that splendid meal at an end, we boys – four in number – are found sitting on our sea chests, each smoking a cigarette. We are now back in the little house abaft the mainmast; no seas are crashing against the door. We are in the best of humors.

Boys are not allowed to smoke on board German sailing ships. Otto Gau, the *Steuermann* (mate), looks in the door:

"Merry Christmas," he says, "Smoke your cigarettes. I hope you enjoy them." Contentment sat on the *D. H. Watjen.*

But there are two Christmas Days to celebrate in Germany – and aboard its ships.

On the second Christmas Day at about seven o'clock in the morning arrived the stower, the burton man, and the man who handles the sacks on the table in the hold. In the distance appears a loaded lighter.

"Well, we have to work this day after all; I hate to do it. But tell the men to turn to, *Steuermann,*" says the captain.

"Turn to!" the *Steuermann* orders.

"This is Christmas!" Ernest, the big shot in the fo'c's'le, replies. "There is not work on Christmas."

"We have to work, we cannot turn the lighter back," says Gau.

"Forget it. We don't work on Christmas Day."

"You cannot refuse duty," the captain says after he has called the crew aft. "I'll be obliged to log you. It will cost you a month's pay."

"We do not work on Christmas Day," says Ernest, "and that is that."

But by now the lighter is alongside. It must be discharged. The crew won't do it so the deckboys are mustered and the "idlers" or petty officers. Four boys crew the winch, and the old carpenter and the steward help out. It is slow work; Chips is not much help, and Willie, my watch mate, is not one of the huskiest. He had not been ordered to this work at the cargo for this reason. As I remember, we discharged two lighters before the day was over.

In the evening I was one of the boat crew that put Captain Gerdes on shore.

"It must have been a good Christmas for you boys," says he. "Look, you earned three marks." Three whole marks for ten hours of grind in the tropical sun! Three marks; that was 75 cents as the exchange was those days. Well, we thanked the captain for the chance to make it. The whole day was overtime.

Ordinarily we worked two hours a day overtime. I made more in the two hours overtime each day than I made in the eight hours at regular pay.* It was forty *Pfennig* overtime rate an hour for A.B.s and thirty *Pfennig* for boys. (There are 100 *Pfennig* to a mark.) I do not see to this day why I, as a boy, employed as one of the "horsepowers" at the hand winch, should have got ten *Pfennig* less than the A. B.s, especially as I produced real horsepower and some A. B.s rested on the handles. But I did not even think of laying up. This was my first ship; I was determined to succeed in my profession.

*On the pay table at the German consulate at Dunkerque when the voyage ended I was paid for 136 hours overtime at thirty *Pfennig* an hour, two hours each day. (German law forbade the crew working cargo for more than eight hours a day in the tropics without being paid overtime.) Taking off the ten hours at Christmastime, that means that I worked 63 days in the cargo, plus Christmas; that makes 64. In that time I worked – without missing a day – in moving by hand a total of seven thousand tons of cargo: the outward-bound cargo handled briquet by briquet, the homeward-bound cargo lifted in at the cranks of the iron hand winch.

The day after the second Christmas Day Ernest and Carl, the spokesmen for the crew, had another trick up their sleeve. The captain had told them he was logging them a month's pay for not working on the second Christmas Day – they were going to get even. They both declared themselves sick.

The captain called the doctor out from shore to check on their faked symptoms.

"Whatever it is," the doctor said, "I have never seen anything like it."

* * * * *

"Some Christmas!" Clarence Krueger said, sitting in the snug saloon of the *Coos Bay.* "Celebrated with what we would call now a labor beef."

"Well, not the worst Christmas," said I. "After all I made three marks."

"Come on – seventy-five cents is practically nothing."

"It is when your day's wage is a little over eight cents."

"Eight cents a day?"

"Eight decimal one five, to be exact."

The figure was so small that it impelled Clarence to make some remark about the wage I was getting at the end of my seafaring career – now. Instead of the ten marks, or $2.50 a month I received as deckboy on the *D. H. Watjen,* I was paid $1485 a month when I relieved as skipper on the *Coos Bay.*

"But money . . ." I said, "I'll tell you what counted more than all that overtime I earned in the *D. H. Watjen*, not that I didn't gloat over every *Pfennig.*

"On the voyage home Captain Gerdes said in the presence of the mate as I passed that way:

"'*Steuermann,* that man earned more overtime than anyone in the ship.'

"That was the first time I was called a *man* – that's when I felt grown up for the first time. I had worked every ton of briquets and nitrate."

"We have advanced quite a bit in cargo handling since those days," I said, after a pause. "There is a diesel crane mounted on board the *Coos Bay* and forklifts down in the hold to move the cargo – not a Chileno trained to stagger along with a 200 lb. sack on his back."

"There is a difference . . ." Clarence said.

"Yes, there is. There is another difference. That day at Caleta Buena, I had a chance to look ahead, a life before me, a boy's view.

"Now, I can look back, my life is behind me; there will be no more Christmases afloat. My sailing days are nearly done."

"Which Christmas was the happiest?" asked Clarence, changing the subject.

"This is a pretty good one. Guy makes good coffee, and have you tried his apple pie?"

"You are easily satisfied . . ."

"After all, I'm *here.*"

"You wouldn't prefer to be sitting on your sea chest in the boy's house on the *D. H. Watjen*, a good dinner inside you, smoking an illegal cigarette, and all of life before you?"

"Not particularly. There is another way to look at it. Bill Adams, the sea writer, put it well."

I rose and went to my cabin and got the quote:

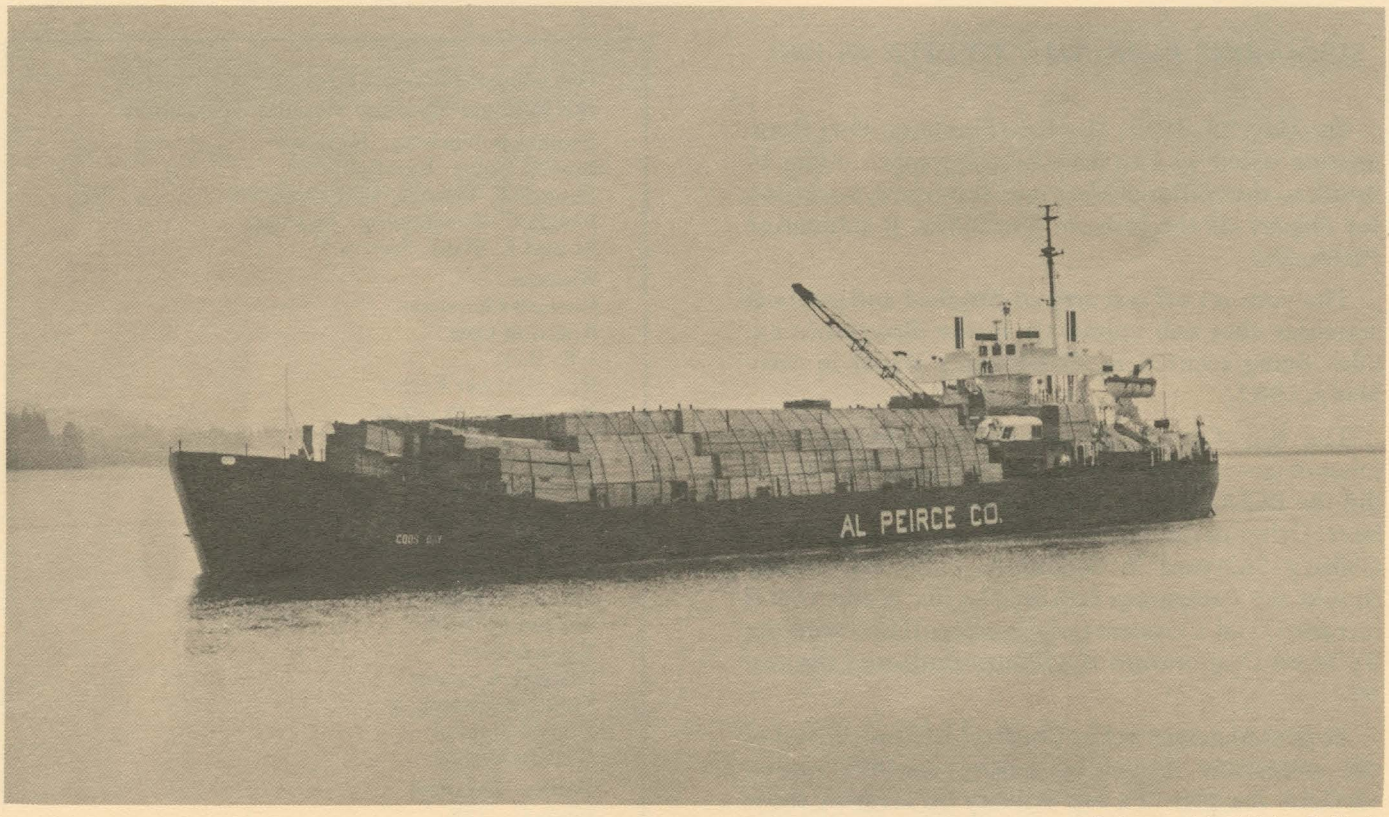
"'If a man has spent his boyhood by the sea and the best of his years upon it, he'll have a grand picture gallery to wander in when he is old and awaits his pilot.'"

Clarence nodded and smiled.

"Guy," he said to the steward, "I think I'll join Fred in a piece of that apple pie."

* * * * * *

In the wheelhouse of the "steam schooner" *Rolando,* Chief Mate Fred Klebingat (right) conns the helm. Like the *Coos Bay*, the diesel-powered *Rolando* was a World War II surplus craft converted for the lumber trade.The *Rolando* was a former LSM, or "medium landing ship."



— Photograph by Victor C. West

The so-called "steam schooner" *Coos Bay* was actually a World War II surplus LST ("tank landing ship") efficiently adapted for the lumber trade between Coos Bay and Southern California. The term "steam schooner," referring to a previous generation of lumber-carrying vessels, died hard on the Pacific Coast.

About the Author

Capt. Fred K. Klebingat was born near Kiel, Germany, in 1889. In this year's Christmas story (the captain has written eight of these stories, true accounts, for the San Francisco Maritime Museum – now the National Maritime Museum), the captain tells how he first came to go to sea.

Five of his Christmas stories have been republished by the Bernice P. Bishop Museum of Honolulu in a book called *Christmas at Sea.*

"I realized at an early date that there must be some seafaring going on where one did not have to round Cape Horn in the middle of the Southern winter . . ." Captain Klebingat wrote me in later years. He found it on the Pacific Coast in lumber schooners and barkentines and rose to command, although his first trip as captain was from Kobe to Manila in an exotic old Dutch bark, teak over iron ribs, with a cargo of empty gin bottles and carboys of acid on deck. "Reckless Ross" Millman, the first man to ride a motorcycle around the inside of a barrel, traveled as passenger (his cycle and barrel were in the hold) – he had to get to Manila by Carnival time. That was in 1918, after Klebingat had spent two years as chief mate of the *Falls of Clyde* and later had been wrecked on the coast of Japan in the four-masted bark *Star of Poland.*

In 1919, Capt. Klebingat took command of the four-masted schooner *Melrose* and continued in her until the mid-twenties; the *Melrose* was the last regular Southseasman out of San Francisco carrying lumber to Fiji and Tonga and returning with copra from Rotuma, Tonga, Niuafoo (Tin Can Island), and Niuatobutabu. The captain subsequently spent the 1930s as master of large schooner yachts in South Sea voyaging, commanded Liberty ships and tankers during World War II in both the Atlantic and Pacific and, after the war, spent over two decades in the "last steam schooners" as described here.

Capt. Klebingat is in all likelihood the most remarkable sea captain left in this country – possibly in the world. The story here published he wrote this year at the age of 91.

–K.K.

This Christmas issue of the *Sea Letter* was produced by the staff of the National Maritime Museum, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and funded by the National Maritime Museum Association.

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SUBMARINE *PAMPANITO* TO OPEN IN 1982

On May 28, 1981, the San Francisco Port Commission voted 4 - 1 to lease berthing space at Pier 45 South to the National Maritime Museum Association for display of the historic World War II submarine *Pampanito.*

The vote set off a scurry of physical and political activities that will culminate in the *Pampanito* exhibit being secured at Fisherman's Wharf in early March 1982.

The Bay Conservation and Development Commission gave its approval to the project in October as did the BCDC Design Review Committee two weeks later. Other permits followed. A contract was let to Colberg Shipyard in Stockton, California, which should see *Pampanito* returned to her World War II integrity, and a contract is being negotiated with the By-Word Corporation for interpretation of the vessel.

Project Manager is Mr. Charles McGuire, bosun of the submarine during her entire wartime career. McGuire has placed a top priority on securing those portions of *Pampanito's* profile and below-deck pieces that are now missing from the boat.

Knowledgeable persons who would enjoy participating in the project on a volunteer basis are urged to call Executive Director David Nelson at (415) 673-0700.

This issue of the *Sea Letter* was published by the National Maritime Museum Association:

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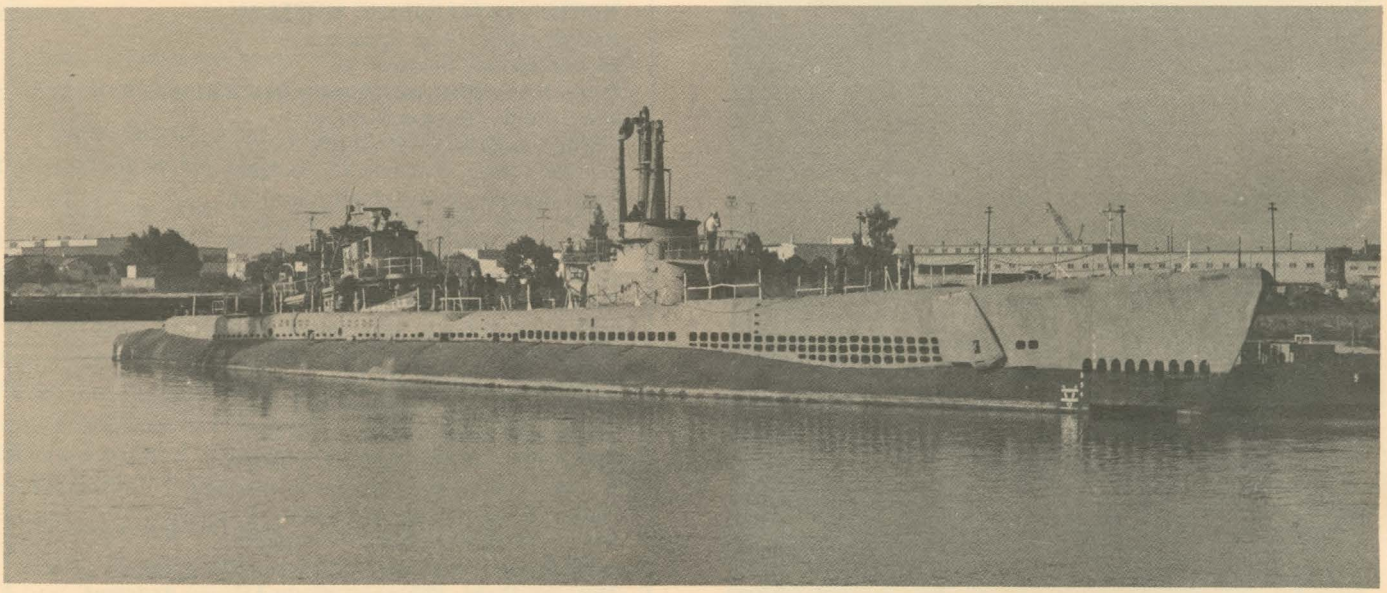
The World War II submarine *Pampanito* in Stockton, California, 1976.



The Trustees and Staff of the National Maritime Museum Association
wish you Joy and Peace through the Holiday Season and in the year ahead . . .